

“It wasn’t built for us”: The possibility of Indigenous food sovereignty in settler colonial food bureaucracies

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Abstract

This article examines the extent to which Indigenous-led food systems and sovereignty goals, frameworks, and priorities are recognized, affirmed, and supported within the agri-food public sector. For this study, we focus on the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), but the findings and analysis have implications for settler-Indigenous relations more broadly. First, we situate Indigenous food systems and sovereignties within the context of agri-food

bureaucracies in Canada. We then present the research design, which involved 27 interviews with people working within or collaborating with OMAFRA on issues related to agricultural land use, programming, and development, and Indigenous relations and food systems. The findings are categorized into five themes: differing needs, visions, and priorities; land access, conversion, and health; representation; consultation and consent in agri-food programming; capacity building. The findings reveal major gaps in Indigenous representation, leadership, and control, and an absence of Indigenous-led planning and decision-making in the agri-food public sector. The findings further show that non-Indigenous people lack crucial

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knowledge concerning treaties and Indigenous relationships to land and stewardship, which creates ongoing and significant barriers to reconciliation. We close by discussing key barriers and opportunities for supporting Indigenous food system and sovereignty programming and ways forward for deepening settler knowledge of Indigenous issues and experiences. The perspectives shared in this study are intended to provide food system research, planning, policy, and practice with insights in order to begin to address structural injustices and better support Indigenous food sovereignty.

Keywords

Indigenous Food Sovereignty, Food Systems, Food Policy, Land Use Policy, Settler Colonialism, Governance, Consultation and Consent

Introduction

Food has long been used as a tool of colonialism in what is now known as Canada. Colonialism separated Indigenous people from their land, which has had significant implications for Indigenous governance, culture, food, and community. There are growing calls for Indigenous land and food reclamation and sovereignty as a means to mend colonial ruptures and support processes of land return and restoration. Federal and provincial governments in Canada have pursued a path of reconciliation, “based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership” (Department of Justice Canada, 2021, para. 1), which has thus far failed to address these calls for land return and restoration (Rotz & Kepkiewicz, 2018; Yellowhead Institute, 2019). In food and agriculture, governments have focused on better “including” Indigenous voices in state-directed and -controlled agricultural policy processes without recognizing that Indigenous peoples are willing and capable of directing and determining food system solutions that work for them (Kepkiewicz & Rotz, 2018). Meanwhile, Indigenous communities remain under-resourced relative to settler communities, with funding and programming often tied to settler-defined jurisdictions and colonial rules, outputs, and expectations of “success” (Daigle, 2018; Pasternak, 2016; Yellowhead Institute, 2019). Reconciliation rhetoric

notwithstanding, Indigenous peoples continue to be excluded from decision making concerning land and agriculture as well as environment, health, and education (Indigenous Climate Action, 2021).

In this study, we examine the relationship between the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs of Ontario (OMAFRA) and First Nations communities in Ontario, but the analysis has implications and applications involving Indigenous peoples broadly; see, for instance, agricultural Crown land sales administered by agricultural ministries in Saskatchewan and Manitoba (Frew, 2023; Province of Manitoba, 2023). Our research reveals the ongoing issues and struggles Indigenous peoples face in seeking their food sovereignties and, put simply, indicates why the work of Indigenous food sovereignty is so difficult in practice. Our data illustrate issues that arise when ministries, large organizations, and governmental agencies (what we are calling “agri-food bureaucracies”) try to work with Indigenous communities: primarily, how governments continue to prioritize Western and colonial approaches to agricultural land relations and food production while undermining and contaminating Indigenous food systems (Robin et al., 2021). Currently, Indigenous peoples remain excluded from decision-making spaces. As a result, programming and funding opportunities often force Indigenous applicants into a very limited and inappropriate set of goals, guidelines, and definitions of success. While funding for new projects is often made available, there is little support for ongoing work and sustaining of programming. Furthermore, when Indigenous communities seek funding to support First Nations’ provisioning of country, traditional and/or wild game foods, it is often considered to be “outside the scope of the available funding” by food and agricultural institutions such as OMAFRA. Despite the long history of colonial control and restriction of ancestral, land-based, and wild foods, these foods still make up a significant part of the diet for many Indigenous peoples (Martens et al., 2016; Robin, 2019).

This study makes several substantial findings that will be detailed in the Results and Discussion sections. First, there are major concerns, primarily related to land contamination, privatization, and conversion, regarding OMAFRA’s understanding

and management of agri-food and forest lands, which is impacting treaty rights as well as Indigenous hunting, food growing, health, and livelihood practices. Second, Indigenous communities must navigate significant programming, jurisdiction, and legislation barriers that are unique to—and particularly difficult and time-consuming for—First Nations. First Nations receive little to no support and representation within the public sector in overcoming these barriers. Third, there are very few organizational spaces and positions within Indigenous communities dedicated to supporting food provision and security, and agriculture.

More broadly, the pervasive lack of knowledge and education opportunities on the part of non-Indigenous decision-makers and public sector personnel concerning treaties and Indigenous relationships to land and stewardship create ongoing and significant barriers to reconciliation. Rhetorical commitments to reconciliation have yet to lead to meaningful material changes in institutional structures, cultures, and priorities, such as funding commitments, knowledge building, and programming design and implementation, as well as staffing and leadership. To achieve meaningful change and reparation, the agri-food public sector must take a structural, as well as respectful, approach to knowledge, dialogue, listening, reflection, action, and relationship building with Indigenous communities.

The stories and experiences presented here are not unique to the people of First Nations participating in the study, nor are they unique to OMAFRA. Rather, they are symptoms and outcomes of the colonial relation; they shed light on the larger dynamics at work. The recommendations we offer are intended to provide food system research, planning, policy, and practice with opportunities to address structural injustices and advance Indigenous food sovereignty.

Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Agri-food Bureaucracies in Canada

At every level of government in Canada—municipal, regional, provincial, federal—departments and ministries participate in maintaining colonial land and food relations. Provincial ministries of food and agriculture are mandated to administer, advise, and support economic and land-based

activities related to food, agriculture, and rural community development. In Ontario, OMAFRA provides policy and programming support for the growth of the sector, the expansion of agri-food production, processing and value chain activity, as well as production, environmental, and economic resources for farmers and food producers (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2023). The Ministry offers a range of funding assistance, community development resources, and agri-food programs for farmers, processors, communities, research institutions, and organizations. They also play an important role in agricultural land-use planning and policy (OMAFRA, 2023). Therefore, while these ministries are rarely considered when analysing settler-Indigenous relations in Canada (the focus tends to be on Indigenous Services Canada), their mandates have significant implications for Indigenous land and food sovereignty.

The term food sovereignty was defined at the landmark 2007 gathering in Mali of small-scale food producers and activists from all over the world as the “right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2007). Many Indigenous scholars and land defenders have pointed out that the right to food as understood through the term food sovereignty is complex and cannot be achieved through food access alone (Coté, 2016; Robin, 2019; Whyte, 2018). Honoring sovereign Indigenous Nations’ right to food requires honoring their ongoing access to ecologically healthy and uncontaminated lands and respecting the cultural, relational, and livelihood practices that underpin their foodways (Whyte, 2018). Traditional foods such as salmon, caribou, and wild rice are “entwined with hard-to-replace qualities of relationships that comprise collective capacities” (Whyte, 2018, p. 363). Settler colonialism has deliberately obstructed these collective rights and capacities. Indigenous scholars and activists have thus established the concept of Indigenous food sovereignty in order to better highlight and assert the long and varied histories, practices, and inherent rights to hunting, harvest-

ing, and gathering that compose Indigenous food systems (Coté, 2016; Daigle, 2017; Martens et al., 2016; Morrison, 2011, 2020; Settee & Shukla, 2020; Whyte, 2018).

In order to establish settler land and food economies in Canada, colonial governments and actors sought to annihilate Indigenous foodways and restrict Indigenous nations and communities¹ from building and maintaining their food sovereignty. The establishment and imposition of settler agri-food economies was premised on the colonial project of land theft, wherein the Canadian government “gifted” unceded Indigenous lands to settler European families (Carter, 2016; Rotz, 2017). Extensive historical documentation illuminates the Indigenous land dispossession that forcibly removed Indigenous peoples from their foodways and subsistence practices (Carter, 1990, 2016; Daschuk, 2013; Harris, 2004; Hill, 2017; Krasowski, 2019; Rück, 2021). Colonial governments restricted Indigenous involvement in settler agriculture, despite formal claims that they wanted Indigenous peoples to become farmers (Carter, 1990). Several policies authorized settler land theft alongside Indigenous land, food, and cultural restrictions, including the Dominion Lands Act, the pass and reserve system, and the Métis scrip policy (Carter, 2016; Hoy, 2021; Krasowski, 2019). As a result, “Indigenous communities were no longer guaranteed local access to culturally appropriate and nutritious food” (Robin, 2019, p. 2), denying them their basic rights, sovereignty, and self-determination. A settler food economy established to benefit and serve settler peoples forced industrially produced and highly processed foods onto Indigenous communities (Coté, 2016; Desmarais, 2015; Grey & Patel, 2015; Matties, 2016; Settee & Shukla, 2020). These foods are often ecologically, locally, and culturally inappropriate, with devastating effects for Indigenous

communities in terms of high rates of poverty and food insecurity, and diabetes and other diet-related illnesses (Pal et al., 2013; Rudolph & McLachlan, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2012; Socha et al., 2012; Tarasuk et al., 2016). Amidst chronic underfunding for programming and infrastructure, and heavy restrictions on land access, cultural practices, economic activity and mobility, Indigenous peoples have been fighting to maintain and advance their foodways (Jäger et al., 2019; Morrison, 2011; Rudolph & McLachlan, 2013; Settee & Shukla, 2020). Within the context of settler colonial violence and dispossession, many scholars, activists, and knowledge holders have argued that the private property relationship to land must be transformed, and land returned and/or rematriated² in order for Indigenous food sovereignty to be meaningfully and sustainably exercised (Coulthard, 2014; Daigle, 2017; Morrison, 2011, 2020; Robin, 2019; Simpson, 2014).

Paternalism and colonial erasure continue to be key themes defining the relationship between agri-food bureaucracies and Indigenous communities in Canada (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Robin et al., 2021). The “Canadian Food System” is not a unified project, as the term suggests. Indigenous food systems and practices are diverse and distinct from the industrial model forcibly established by settlers (Coté, 2016; Robin, 2019; Whyte, 2018). Many Indigenous communities have visions and pathways for the reclamation of their food systems and well-being, but this knowledge is often ignored by colonial assumptions of what “our” Canadian food system ought to look like (Coté, 2016; Robin, 2019; Whyte, 2018). The experiences shared in this study demonstrate how ministerial perceptions and assumptions about Indigenous realities alongside bureaucratic structures and mechanisms continue to erase, exclude, and harm Indigenous communities and their initiatives.

¹ Under colonial legal orders imposed through the Indian Act, Indigenous nations have been categorized into First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups. First Nations communities are governed through a Band Council system (630 across Canada), which has been colonially imposed, is patriarchal in nature, and does not reflect Indigenous governance, clan, and kinship systems (Coyle & Borrows, 2017; Daigle, 2016; Pictou, 2020).

² These are certainly complex and highly contextually specific processes. That said, there are a number of cases where folks are working to return, rematriate, and/or share land across North America, such as the Eastern Woodlands Rematriation Collective, White Earth Land Recovery Project, the Treaty Land Sharing Network, and Nimkii Aazhibikong, to name a few. See Yesno and Lopez (2020) for further examples.

Research Design

Conversations, consultations, and interviews with OMAFRA staff were conducted in spring 2020. From March to August 2021, 27 formal interviews were held with 16 OMAFRA staff members who work across divisions and branches that include policy, planning, and economic development, and with 11 external contacts who work in and with Ontario Indigenous communities on food and agriculture-related issues and have engaged with OMAFRA for several years. OMAFRA staff were contacted based on their role in relation to the themes and issues relevant to this research. Further recruitment occurred via snowball sampling.

In addition to the standard protocol for the research ethics board approval process, we also completed a document for “research involving Indigenous People,” which the Indigenous Research Ethics Board reviewed and approved. For external contacts, the first author reached out to Northern and Central Ontario food and farming organizations suggested by OMAFRA staff. For Indigenous participant recruitment, she connected with Indigenous colleagues, and Indigenous participants from the 2021 Indigenous Agri-Food Funders Forum located within Ontario, and reached out to staff working in several First Nations communities across Central East and Northeast Ontario. Of the total 11 external interviewees, seven were Indigenous people working on food/land issues in their communities; two were non-Indigenous, one who was working for an Indigenous organization on agriculture, and one working with several Indigenous communities on food sovereignty; the final two were non-Indigenous people working in Northern Ontario food and agriculture organizations. The Indigenous interviewees were from First Nations communities and organizations across Northern Ontario that were ratified by treaties such as James Bay Treaty No. 9, the Robinson-Huron Treaties, and the Williams Treaty territories, which encompass the territory of the Anishinaabe.

Each interview lasted one to two hours. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using discourse and content analysis and then connected to relevant research, literature, and reports, including Provincial and Ministerial policy and programming documents such as the duty to consult with Abo-

original peoples in Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2013), the OMAFRA Inclusion Strategy (2018), the Northern Livestock Action Plan, the Agricultural Systems Approach, and several additional provincial anti-racism and inclusion strategies and reports. We distributed a draft report to staff interviewees, external contacts, and community members for their feedback and reflection. Several external participants also circulated the draft to colleagues and community members for further insights and feedback.

Results

Theme 1: Differing Needs, Visions, and Priorities

Differing needs, visions, and priorities is an overarching theme that arose through the interviews. There are significant gaps and disparities between government visions and priorities for agri-food programming and those of many Indigenous communities. Agri-food programming is often positioned through the purview of private land governance, economic development, and enterprise expansion. Indigenous food programming is thus often assessed on its potential to contribute to wider economic expansion. In effect, governments require projects to demonstrate a capacity to contribute to the dominant settler economy. Several of the subsequent issues, barriers, and concerns discussed by Indigenous interviewees were rooted in or connected to these underlying assumptions. One interviewee stated:

You have to be operating as a business [to apply for funding], and the majority of our communities, if there's an interest in agriculture and they're just getting going, it's more for the community . . . for food sovereignty. To make sure that people have food in the community as a whole, not for one person to start making a profit off of whatever they're doing. . . . At a lot of times there's a reluctance to [apply] because they just want to provide for their community, or they just want to start small.

Another interviewee shared a similar experience:

We have one community that has quite a number of maple syrup operators, but they're all doing it for their own family and for the community and not so much to supply outside the community. None of them are going to be looking to apply for funding, even though they want to improve their sugarbush or improve their building or whatever. They're not going to go jumping through those hoops because they know that they're not operating as a business and they're not going to get the funding.

In this case, a large community agri-food proposal was turned down because "it wasn't traditional [i.e., Western] agriculture, but it was using food, using animals from the wild, and using natural foods." Rather than economic development, the proposal focused on community development: "They had a number of people that do hides, and they wanted to hunt animals and then use [them], and develop the skills to make moccasins." The interviewee stated that governments and funders ought to be "more open to different types of economic initiatives. It was an economic initiative. It was something that could result in economic benefit for the community. It just didn't fit that traditional agricultural mold, so they didn't want to fund it."

Government programming and policies often restrict Indigenous Nations and communities from engaging in Indigenous governance and management models and food provisioning, such as wild game, fish, and other non-cultivated foods. Yet, those who want to participate in livestock, poultry, and dairy farming also feel excluded by the dominant agri-food sector.

One interviewee shared their experience establishing a band-owned, locally supplied grocery store: "Managing the grocery store, there's not a lot of resource sharing in the community in terms of what can this family provide, and contribute to the grocery store. . . . We're running under the hierarchy of grocery stores, like Loblaw's." Ideally, they stated, more local and wild foods and food sharing would be offered by the store. However:

[A] lot of it is food safety. A lot of people in the community consume wild game, fish,

things like that, but it's not really known how to incorporate those types of foods into a retail setting. Because they're not FDA approved, or things like that. We're left using external resources. For fresh fish, we use a local fishery that's not Indigenous owned. . . . We have to use theirs, because they go through all the testing and the packaging. . . . We have local people who run their own fisheries and sell their own fish privately on the side, but we can't necessarily put the food in the grocery store, because it's not tested.

As such, the conventional grocery store model bolsters the sale of industrial and processed foods, rather than local foods, which is the opposite direction from where many respondents said community members want to go.

The dissonance between funding guidelines and attempts to create sustainable community food initiatives on the ground illustrates how differently Indigenous communities and governmental institutions view and define "economics" and "agriculture." Interviewees pointed to larger issues of paternalism and colonial mentalities when speaking about the disconnect between government and Indigenous agri-food visions, goals, definitions, and desires:

Traditional ecological knowledge is not held at the same standard. . . . It's not recognized . . . but we're seeing the effects of spraying glyphosate. . . . We know that things like glyphosate don't break down the same way in northern soils, it's more acidic up here, it's slower, it stays around for at least three seasons. . . . It leads to so many health implications. So when we talk [about] epistemology . . . they think that their way of knowing is top dog. . . . And yet traditional ecological knowledge holds the ecology, and has the answers.

Interviewees working with Indigenous communities identified a strong need and desire for community-led food projects: "A lot of the initiatives the Lands Department in our community have done are to support and foster food sovereignty and food security through building capacity

for people to grow their own food or harvest locally, like morels, fiddleheads, or raspberries. There's a lot of that in our community that just grows wild, and they've even done wild rice." Another stated, "I want to try and incorporate Indigenous methodologies of farming in our community. I don't want people to look at big agriculture and think that's the way we need to go. We need to do things in a small way."

Many also spoke of the need for projects connecting local employment and well-being with land-based practices and stewardship, including community food growing, harvesting, and food preservation:

I want to create space to work with the land that's going to also be available to people who work in addictions and mental health, and that there's somewhere people can go and be on the land in a healthy way, in a productive way, and learn and connect on the land while they're healing. . . . My goal is to create food jobs in the community and connections to land-based jobs in this community for our people. . . . We need to make these safe spaces for people where they can reconnect . . . that all works together in the community.

The interviewee continued, "I don't want to get in the farming game. . . . I want our community to have our own food, to have our own fresh produce . . . to not have it come from the Ontario Food Terminal." But in working with the agri-food sector, "I find it's like, 'We want to convert you into farmers.' That's what we got, like, 'Can we colonize you some more this way?' Or, 'You have to do it this way,' and this 'Big Ag is the only way to go.' . . . We don't need to get into the farming game, we need to feed our nation." Agri-food policy and programming are "assimilating Indigenous folks into that [conventional agri-food] project. We've done this game before. We have a history of being amazing farmers with the shittiest implements ever, thrown in the garbage and handed down to us, and then became amazing at it, and we couldn't compete because we weren't allowed to sell it. We weren't allowed to be part of the market."

Some specific initiatives that Indigenous interviewees and their communities were developing or looking to establish included community regenerative gardens and farms, shared smokehouses, seed banks, shared harvesting programs, community or cooperative sugar bush production, and a community ice house for fishermen and game hunters. There were concerns raised, however, that agri-food policy and funders do not see such community-centered projects as viable agri-food activities. A government staff member noted, "community-centered initiatives, like community gardens or volunteer greenhouses, are not a farm and aren't considered valid. Business development resources are underpinned by a vastly different world view."

Another ministry staff member shared their understanding of Indigenous food security and sovereignty: "It's access to fresh, healthy food . . . In Indigenous communities, you have traditional Indigenous diets that some elders and, you know, there's always a component of the community, like a subculture that really does continue to embrace that." The staff member seemed to view these ideas, projects, and initiatives as marginal, and not representative of community visions and goals. When asked how government could support Indigenous food sovereignty, the staff member stated:

A Ministry populated by agricultural scientists, like dairy people and crops people and specialists, and stuff like that. What can we do to support traditional food systems? Other than respond the best way that we can if we're asked about something like food safety, right? I mean, we do have production sheets on wild rice and blueberries, and we support maple syrup production and further processing and honey and honey bees, as well as aquaculture. But at the end of the day, what can we do? I'd say the majority of the effort has to be built upon what we already do as a Ministry, which is to transfer knowledge and expand the scope of our support into Indigenous communities.

This discussion reveals several underlying assumptions regarding the role and purpose of government agri-food programming. Governments

position themselves as experts through which communities and applicants are expected to receive help. The institutional culture arguably is premised on the idea that knowledge and “solutions” must come from and be maintained within government, rather than a more collaborative and co-constructivist perspective that emphasizes support and resource sharing over knowledge transfer from one party (government) to another (clients and users). This institutional culture upholds the colonial food policies and practices that Indigenous communities are seeking to recover from. Agri-food institutions effectively discriminate against Indigenous communities by disregarding their traditions, practices, and visions of food growing and gathering. In order to support Indigenous communities, agri-food institutions must broaden their perceptions of “agriculture.”

Furthermore, the concern for those working toward Indigenous food sovereignty is that the institutional approach remains assimilative, significantly limiting the kinds of collaborations, dialogue, and projects possible for Indigenous peoples. The solution should not be for governments to internally acquire Indigenous knowledge in order to support Indigenous-led programs and projects. Rather, governments could choose to adopt a more collaborative, relationship-oriented, nonproprietary, and reciprocal approach.

Many interviewees voiced specific concerns about navigating provincial and federal agricultural and food programming, such as grant programs for new projects, crop and livestock production, storage, distribution, and enterprise development and expansion, and described instances where government staff and funders did not understand or support the unique political contexts and constraints of Indigenous communities. When reflecting on their experience attending business retention and expansion and rural economic development consultations, one participant noted “there’s no program that was actually built by us, for us.” They explained the implications:

One of my questions [for Ministry staff] was, did they have an example of these programs being successful in a First Nations community? As opposed to these big business retention and

expansion corporations that come out of municipalities. Because [municipalities] have the manpower and they source the funding and all of that stuff, which is a lot different than our funding that we get. A lot of the details of our funding are a lot more stringent and very detailed. It’s not very often that we can just spend how we need to, as opposed to how they expect us to. With the lack of resources and lack of knowledge, we get left scrambling trying to figure it out, and then we waste time and money trying to figure it out, because we don’t have the support to tell us, “This is how it could be done.” It creates issues on our end where we can’t necessarily build the tools or resources that we need, because we’re so busy trying to do it the way that they want it done.

The participant continued: “It still comes back to representation, in the sense where they didn’t really have an answer for me in terms of how this applies to a First Nations community. There could be more work done to have programs or streams that are actually built by an Indigenous consultant or Indigenous community.” Several respondents described how government ministries commonly refer them to examples and projects led by municipalities rather than “something geared towards us.” Participants connected these responses to ongoing conditions of institutional neglect and exclusion of Indigenous communities: “They actually aren’t thinking about us.”

Another interviewee clearly expressed the nature and impacts of government-directed information and programming that does not reflect or attend to Indigenous contexts, interests, or needs:

Information and knowledge is—for lack of better words—whitewashed. . . . We need that representation at that government level. Where they feel like, ‘Okay, I think they are actually on my side, they do actually want to help.’ And it’s not just another checkbox kind of thing. . . . *I definitely felt like, it wasn’t really built for me.*

Another interviewee described concerns with financial support and the ways that paternalistic approaches to Indigenous funding can impact their

work and community: “I find that we’re spending a lot of money to go back and fix things that didn’t really get done in the first place. So, it just seems redundant at times. If we want to use the funds for something else, then we have to go and ask permission, ‘Can we use this for this?’ It’s not like, ‘Okay, you spend it how you need to spend it.’” Participants described a general lack of trust and flexibility “in terms of making our own decision to make changes or adjustments in the budgets. It’s kind of always up to the higher power, whoever the funder is, you know, asking permission kind of thing.”

Theme 2: Land Access, Conversion, and Health

The interviews show that limited land access significantly hinders the ability of First Nations to engage in culturally distinct farming and food provisioning practices (e.g., hunting, foraging, ceremony enactment, and agroecology/agroforestry). One interviewee noted that Indigenous people in their community have demonstrated interest in land-based stewardship and agriculture only to find out that “they can’t actually access land.”

Specific concerns arose about government and industry interests in land conversion and privatization for agricultural development such as beef production, often in the name of food security and sustainability. Many confirmed that these developments were not aligned with, did not include, and/or would not benefit their communities:

I know that there was, or is, a policy to do with the expansion of farming land in Northern Ontario. Some of our communities had raised an issue about that, because it’s more treaty land that’s being [taken]. . . . We weren’t sure about the consultation process with how First Nations were going to be linked into that; to be consulted on any land disposition taking place as a result of that policy.

An interviewee noted that since many Indigenous communities are trying to revitalize traditional livelihood practices in their community, government projects aimed at land conversion and privatization of Crown land for agriculture would have significant negative impacts on their ability to uphold treaty rights and build food security in their

community. They connected this to broader concerns about ignorance around treaty relations and obligations:

Often people talk about Crown land, when it’s anything but Crown land. And the language matters. There’s an assumption that if it’s Crown land, that there’s an entitlement. And people don’t know that we have a nation-to-nation agreement, Treaty 9 is exactly that. There are high levels of ignorance about what that means, and high levels of ignorance about how often the treaty has been broken, and certainly not by First Nations. So that contributes to land issues and tensions. It’s rooted in ignorance, which is rooted in culture, which is rooted in these outdated belief systems.

Both ministry staff and external Indigenous interviewees asserted that non-Indigenous people lack the necessary knowledge and understanding about crucial issues, including treaty-making relations and history; the nature, role, and impacts of colonialism and the Indian Act; Indigenous worldviews and systems of land stewardship; and the differences between Crown land, colonial-administered reserve land, and traditional territories. Such ignorance has significant consequences for settler-Indigenous relations in ways that continue to impact Indigenous security and well-being.

One Indigenous participant explained that their community only recently regained their pre-Confederation harvesting rights, but that land accessibility remains a huge issue: “People really want to funnel us into this one space, into this one provincial park. To say, ‘This is where you guys hunt.’” Instead, they would prefer to build relationships with farmers and others in food production and agriculture. However, they have “no idea where to start, because there seems to be almost no relationship. It’s super-racist where we live. And I don’t know how to build that relationship.”

Several participants also described the impacts of agricultural practices, such as pesticide use, on the health of the land and the plant and animal populations needed for sustenance. A participant from a reserve surrounded by large potato farms stated, “I can see how the land is changing, and I

can see them working it too, they're depleting the soil." Another participant explained:

It's had an impact on the wild foods and the animals that graze wild foods. There has been an increase in things like measles. In the moose population, the animals are just not well. . . . We could have food security up here if ministries [and industries] quit contaminating the land that we all depend upon. . . . This assumption that as long as you have bush, you have food just isn't true, because it's not healthy. There's stuff that's going in our environment that wasn't there previously. . . . I find [it] incredibly frustrating because we're not talking about new research here. This stuff has been on the table for a long time.

This participant noted that the government's long-standing goals, priorities, perspectives, and programs have contributed to land and water contamination in ways that hinder Indigenous peoples' access to their traditional territories, food provisioning, and land-based practices, which are affirmed by their treaty rights and support their well-being.

Theme 3: Representation

Indigenous representation within agri-food bureaucracies such as OMAFRA—i.e., Indigenous staff numbers as well as having access, positioning, capacity, and leadership—was identified as a consistent gap when interacting with government ministries and staff.

None of the Indigenous interviewees had been able to connect with or establish a working relationship with an Indigenous staff member at the Ministry, which posed significant barriers when seeking information and accessing services and funding opportunities. All local agricultural advisors were also non-Indigenous people. As one interviewee explained, non-Indigenous staff lack "knowledge about the success of programs in a First Nations community," forming "a huge barrier for every community; at the government level. . . . Most of the people that give us money, or provide us with these funds are non-Indigenous. It's like trying to negotiate with someone who doesn't

really understand the concepts and the real underlying issues, aside from what's on paper."

Interviewees stated that many staff had "never even been to an Indigenous community. . . . They're just providing support based on a checklist or a standard that's the same for all First Nations. But we don't all operate the same, we all have various levels of resources and populations." Rather, consultants are often non-Indigenous, which "starts feeling like they're just trying to claw more out of us. . . . But we're already underfunded as it is, in relation to municipalities . . . and then they constantly ask, 'Well, what do you need it for?' It kind of feels like it comes down to our word against theirs."

Both staff and Indigenous interviewees connected the lack of Indigenous representation and resourcing with the absence of Indigenous-directed programming and staff support:

If the resources aren't there and we're not streamlined to the non-Indigenous community, then we just put our hands up and say, 'Okay, we got to deal with it on our own, to figure out a way to do this, to make it work for us,' which gets a little bit intimidating at times because it just doesn't always work. . . . There are a lot of gaps in the information they provide and information about the financial programming that's available. There's no real Indigenous connection yet.

In turn, several participants described instances where Indigenous-led food and agricultural project proposals were rejected or inappropriate and unattainable project revisions and timelines were proposed by funding review committees.

Theme 4: Consultation and Consent in Agri-Food Programming

Interviewees described consultation that occurred only after programs and grants had been developed and publicized, instead of a process of program co-creation or co-design. Typically, Indigenous participants were notified of or presented with program information only after it was designed and approved, often as a means of promoting the program and encouraging their application submis-

sions. Such programs are often created and designed initially to serve municipalities, and only later promoted to First Nations and Indigenous food providers. As an interviewee stated, Indigenous people need to be involved “at the very beginning of the first conversation,” from the initial conception to the opportunity to “start developing these things for ourselves.”

Indigenous interviewees described being contacted for initial meetings but with little or no follow-up. Several noted that they had not even been notified about whether governments moved ahead with plans, policies, or programming after initial meetings: “There’s always that information session conversation that happens. . . . We have those beginning conversations. And that’s it. It just disappears, our conversations are done.”

This interviewee described further concerns with public consultation and engagement processes:

It’s not just about them asking us questions and then taking that information back and developing their policy. . . . *We should be working together to develop policy.* They’re working in isolation from us. *It’s got to be more collaborative.*

Another interviewee shared their experience of the consultation process and how it impacts communities:

Every time something comes out, it’s like we have to find a way to make it work for our people. . . . There isn’t very often that consultation piece beforehand. It’s always, “Well, here’s what we have, do what you can with it.”

Others described similar experiences that point to gaps and barriers in the consultation process. They noted the need for individual communities to be directly consulted at the outset and during ongoing development:

So often, what happens is that when we first have an initial conversation with a ministry, eventually what they’ll do is they’ll end up hand-picking what Indigenous person they want to develop something. . . . If they want to

speak on behalf of us, they need to consult with us. *And that’s right from the very beginning. Right at the very beginning, the duty is there.*

As noted earlier, concerns arose about the consultation process, treaty violations, and government attempts to privatize and convert Crown land. Notably, Indigenous interviewees found that they were given little information about consultation and consent processes across ministries.

Several government staff described their own feelings of frustration when colleagues and managers often referred to Indigenous consultation as a barrier to program implementation. Others demonstrated firsthand this negative view of Indigenous participation. Reflecting on instances where treaty land rights and archeological sites require consultation, one staff member stated, “First Nations are very protective of giving up any land that they believe is theirs.” They added that in cases where the government seeks to convert lands to farmland, it can be difficult to engage in consultation if there may be some archaeological value for the First Nation, making it “impossible to move forward.” This perspective on Indigenous rights as an impediment illustrates larger problematic assumptions that settlers often have, as well as assumptions about their own obligations and responsibilities to Indigenous peoples, lands, and treaties.

Staff described a wide range of levels of knowledge and understanding of settler colonialism, Indigenous rights, treaty relations, and duty to consult. One common denominator is that they have very little experience working with Indigenous people and communities. Interviewees noted an increase in voluntary training, however, including cultural awareness training and an Indigenous relations community of practice. These have helped provide some basic competencies on Indigenous issues; nevertheless, many felt that there continue to be “huge barriers with Indigenous participation” and consultation. One participant observed that many staff members do not “understand duty to consult, they don’t understand the basics.” Interviewees noted issues ranging from lack of cultural awareness, poor resourcing, and underrepresentation, to lack of Indigenous-directed and -centered programming, funding, and support.

An interviewee stated that there is very little collective knowledge of Indigenous land claims, ownership, and consultation procedures. Even with efforts at consultation, “the accountability isn’t there.” They noted that responding to Indigenous comments and concerns often is not required. On some government projects interviewees had seen little to no Indigenous representation or consultation. In other instances, Indigenous representatives and communities were grouped into a larger list of stakeholders, including municipalities, industry, farmer associations, community organizations, and ENGOs, who were all consulted using similar methods. When asked about Indigenous consultation, one government staff interviewee stated that consultation is often “superficial. It’s not really meaningfully in the interest of the public good.” When asked about prospects for more in-depth and ongoing models of program co-creation and shared decision making with Indigenous communities, they stated that those conversations are not occurring: “There are opportunities, but not much is going on.” Some OMAFRA staff members called on government to shift institutional culture in order to advance reconciliation: “The expectation has to be different when it comes to Indigenous peoples. Because of the history of this country, things have to be different.”

Theme 5: Capacity-Building

There is little awareness on the part of non-Indigenous staff, bureaucrats, and decision-makers about the lived realities and experiences of Indigenous communities, which leads to significant resource gaps and creates barriers for Indigenous capacity building. Participants gave specific examples of resourcing and external support constraints for local projects. One interviewee explained that even when receiving referrals for their community to undertake projects, the money, capability, and resources were unavailable. As a result, “we lose the income effect in the community, because we just don’t have the proper resources, whether it’s human or physical” to lead or undertake the projects themselves.

In reference to community food system programming, an external interviewee explained, “I don’t know if OMAFRA realizes that we need a lot

more capacity at the community level to be able to encourage agriculture. It’d be great if we could have a person in each community that was devoted to agriculture . . . but we just don’t have that level of resourcing right now.” Currently, there are very few organizational resources and positions in Indigenous communities dedicated to supporting food provision, security, and agriculture. Public agri-food institutions do not typically contribute significant resources toward Indigenous advisors who are connected to their communities and understand community visions, needs, and protocols.

Internal capacity constraints are also exacerbated by bureaucratic policies and expectations, making it more difficult for Indigenous applicants to compete for agri-food funding and program resources. “Our communities don’t have the capacity to be able to even write the level of proposals required or to spend the amount of time that’s required” for most funding applications. As a result, “A lot of times they might apply, but the quality of the proposal might not be to what’s required to actually get funding. . . . Sometimes they might just decide not to apply.”

Such constraints—alongside general ignorance about Indigenous issues, and other barriers—is of particular concern when dealing with potential land dispossession due to land sale, conversion, and privatization efforts. “When there’s issues like Crown land being changed over to private or anything,” few representatives are able to “advocate on behalf of First Nations.” Such resources and supports are crucial:

Some of our communities in the territory are very small, and they don’t always have the capacity to respond in a given time frame. And they don’t have the resources to hire legal to look at the impact, if there’s archaeological or environmental impact. So, capacity is a big issue.

In turn, when “there’s a land disposition process for Crown land and our community’s supposed to get informed and they have to respond to those notices,” there are significant concerns about the capacity for Indigenous communities to

respond comprehensively and within given time-lines. In many cases, government and private institutions incorrectly assume that adequate consultation has occurred and thus land disposition can proceed. This speaks to the breadth and depth of concerns, demands, and expectations that communities have to contend with and the significant consequences that Indigenous communities may face if they do not meet institutional expectations.

Discussion and Ways Forward

A number of key themes and issues arose that suggest recommendations and ways forward for agri-food policy, programming, and community development while enabling greater support for Indigenous foodways and sovereignty.

Power, Access, and Control: Indigenous Consent, Consultation, and Land Dispossession

Indigenous peoples remain structurally excluded from decision making, where food system visioning, strategic and land-use planning, policy, and programming is discussed and implemented, which significantly impacts Indigenous treaty rights, land access, and food sovereignty. There is also a lack of Indigenous representation across the sector, especially in leadership and decision-making positions, and an absence of Indigenous-led and -directed programming, land use and agri-food planning, policy design, and advising.

Indigenous-specific consultation is also lacking across several sectors and programs, including land-use planning, policy, and economic development, to name a few. Community consultation processes must be enhanced in policy development to include a broader set of voices, and with engagement occurring much earlier on in the process. At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize the unique responsibilities that governments have with regards to Indigenous consent, consultation, and representation. Across several programs, there was a notable lack of Indigenous support or involvement. For instance, there was no involvement in research studies investigating soil carbon sequestration between forest land and converted pasture and agricultural land, there was no observed presence of Indigenous co-management approaches to stewardship and land use change, and there was general

downstreaming of consent and locally specific consultation processes concerning treaty rights issues. In particular, there is strong concern that agricultural land conversion programs would privatize Crown land without adequate Indigenous consent or consultation.

We want to note the well-established critiques of inclusion. Primarily—and we concur—it has been argued that “increased inclusion [of Indigenous, Black and other equity deserving groups] in a corrupt and broken system will do very little to change the system itself” (Walcott, 2021, p. 204). Inclusion too often requires Indigenous peoples to “bear the responsibility for change” (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018, p. 220) and evades the more difficult work of transforming settler colonial institutions. If approached in this way, inclusion will simply co-opt Indigenous peoples into colonial projects and initiatives (Kepkiewicz & Rotz, 2018). Hence, inclusion is not an end goal, but a first step that *may* create space and opportunity for the larger systemic work to get done (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

Due to the lack of substantive Indigenous inclusion and representation, institutional cultures and food system approaches tend to pigeonhole Indigenous peoples and reinforce racist assumptions. Indigenous peoples are perceived as inadequate or overly specialized farmers, despite a well-documented history of colonial exclusion, underfunding, and sabotaging of Indigenous agriculture (Carter, 1990, 2016; Daschuk, 2013). Although Indigenous farmers and communities are not monolithic, this simplistic perspective permeates bureaucratic decision making and programming. Guidelines and goals often assume that Indigenous peoples are only interested in berry or maple syrup production, or limit them to conventional farming models. Generally, enterprise-oriented projects such as aquaculture and maple syrup production can be more neatly integrated into government-approved economies, leaving little room for shared decision making and visioning or Indigenous-centered and -led project design. Instead, Indigenous food systems, projects, and programming, should be supported *on their own terms* rather than those of the government. Institutions must accept and trust the validity and ability of Indigenous-led programs

to create desirable outcomes; and these processes have to be Indigenous-led. Greater inclusion is a step toward creating conditions for Indigenous leadership and direction, but if it is not accompanied by significant shifts in institutional structure (e.g., organizational governance and decision-making, strategic planning, funding, vision and mission), it will likely lead to internal racism, burnout, and distress.

Settler Awareness: A Call for Deeper Learning

Settlers within and beyond food system regimes lack adequate understanding of what exactly Crown land is and who has jurisdiction over it, the differences between reserve land and traditional territories, and Indigenous relationships to land. More recent legal cases, inquiries, and treaty scholarship demonstrate that the common assumption about Crown land—that it can simply be privatized and sold at the will of the colonial administration—is deeply flawed and does not reflect the full treaty-making relationship (Borrows, 2010; Coyle & Borrows, 2017; Krasowski, 2019). Such issues must be revisited and clarified by ministries before land privatization is even considered.

Settler ignorance contributes significantly to stereotypes and false assumptions about Indigenous nations and communities. Beliefs that Indigenous people are deficient farmers and agriculturalists, that they receive more public resources than non-Indigenous Canadians, and that they have exceedingly narrow development interests contribute to a culture of anti-Indigenous racism across the agri-food sector. Many historical accounts and in-depth inquiries have clearly shown these beliefs to be false (Carter, 1990, 2016; Daschuk, 2013; Deloria, 1998; Yellowhead Institute, 2021), and demonstrate how colonial administrators have banned Indigenous nations from practicing their systems of law, governance, land stewardship, food provision, culture, spirituality, family, and kinship. Agri-food institutions must invest in a range of learning opportunities so that non-Indigenous people can educate themselves on these issues more deeply.

Institutions must also address the lack of willingness on the part of some staff to participate meaningfully in Indigenous issues or engage in

anti-racism and diversity work more broadly. As one interviewee stated, anti-Indigenous stereotypes have become “normalized in people’s minds,” manifesting, for example, in unchecked assumptions about Indigenous applicants:

I recall very clearly where we were reviewing applications to projects and the project analyst who was presenting the proposal from an Indigenous community said, “No, we don’t need to give them money, they get enough money already from government.”

Such ignorance allows for racist discrimination and exclusion to continue, or at best allows for inappropriate and tokenistic forms of consultation, representation, and assimilation. Another staff interviewee described the barriers and contradictions they observed in how government approaches diversity and inclusion more broadly:

All of the conversations are about OMAFRA as a workplace: diversity, inclusion. But how can we do better when everything is out of scope in terms of how we are liaising with the people of Ontario? I don’t think that we can ever get there as an organization internally, as a workplace, if we’re not looking at how we can be [racist]? . . . If we’re inclusive, and we have multicultural day, or we have our diversity, inclusion, or Indigenous peoples Lunch and Learn, that’s great. But in the meantime, if we’re not doing duty to consult, and we have systemic exclusion of farmers of color, we’re never going to be a truly inclusive and anti-racist workplace.

Policy, protocol, and language are created within a colonial and a racialized construct, so that inclusive language can never be a stand-in for establishing thorough consultation and consent protocol. and prioritizing and supporting community-led initiatives, programs, and policies. As Indigenous and racial issues are poorly understood, greater institutional training is an essential first step, but certainly not sufficient. Governments and food system actors must direct energy and resources toward establishing comprehensive con-

sent protocol and community-first principles and strategies that provide leadership and staff alike with a clear roadmap for working with communities to support and fund projects already happening, or to support communities in enacting their own visions. The roadmap itself could be established using an Indigenous advisory or council process, the structure itself to be determined collaboratively with Indigenous partners.

***Reflecting on Agri-food System Relationships:
Toward Meaningful Consent and Collaboration***

Across food system work, there are ongoing barriers to processes of Indigenous consent, consultation, and dialogue. Provincial and federal governments often engage in processes of approval-seeking, where consent is understood as a practice of information giving and notification. Engagement is thus premised on minimal legal obligations to consult, and is underpinned by a culture of risk management, turning processes of consent into consultation and downstream consultation into planning and project implementation stages, rather than during conception, design, and visioning. This translates into how public policy is developed and decisions are made. Meanwhile, staff are often unfamiliar with the nuances of consultation, which, beyond basic legal duty, has not been clearly and comprehensively articulated across the federal and provincial public sector. Currently, federal and provincial laws and policies continue to dominate the process, and Indigenous laws and points of view are largely erased. If governments intend to move away from minimal approval seeking, and toward respectful treaty relationships, non-Indigenous peoples have a responsibility to learn about and value Indigenous laws and processes.

This discussion has several significant implications for agri-food policy and practice. First, as our data indicate, notification-oriented approaches overburden already underresourced Indigenous communities. Instead, food programming, land-use planning, and development proposals ought to be initiated by governments and institutional actors only if there is clear indication from First Nations and Indigenous communities that they are interested in following up. Agri-food institutions must also consider implementing transformative changes

to their policy making, moving toward models of nation-to-nation governance, such as co-visioning and management and shared decision-making at upper institutional levels. These processes are not one-size-fits-all; they need to be established through ongoing and direct dialogue processes and collaboration with Indigenous communities. Through co-visioning processes, plans and agreements can be established with specific strategies to build Indigenous representation and capacity and to determine ways for governments and institutions to effectively support and fund community-driven food development projects. As these take time and resources, Indigenous nations must be meaningfully engaged and compensated, which must be prioritized by governments and food system institutions. As treaty people, we grasp the foundational importance of settler-Indigenous relations, Indigenous treaty rights, and sovereignty, which goes far beyond (in both nature and function) minimal legal obligations to consult.


Our results show that relationship-building is essential, and must go at the pace of trust-building and respect for Indigenous needs, circumstances, laws, and processes. As Leela Viswanathan asks, what could the relationship look like if we worked at the pace of trust rather than project timelines (Viswali Consulting, 2021)? What does it mean to slow our processes, especially in terms of development? This is essential for full inclusion and equity. Yet governments privilege quick development and land-use decisions. This is the opposite approach needed for building and maintaining trust. When assessing the extent to which meaningful consent, consultation, and engagement is pursued, it is important that agri-food bureaucracies reflect on who decides what these are. With regards to Indigenous and other equity-deserving groups, it is not up to non-Indigenous people to determine whether their process is evolving in a meaningful way for the community. Governments and institutions must more openly and proactively critique their own processes in collaboration with Indigenous people, and then replace or improve policies, practices, and protocols.

While many public staff members reflected honestly on their own ignorance and lack of engagement with Indigenous communities and

ways of life, without more consistent and structural practices of reflexivity it will continue to be difficult for non-Indigenous staff to center Indigenous goals, needs, and experiences. As one staff member reflected, “It’s overwhelming that with good intentions, one can still do harm, and things don’t get addressed. Staff are scared of legal implications.” It remains difficult to “have staff-to-staff conversations about Indigenous issues,” and there is a culture of fear of doing it wrong. This should be all the more reason for governments and institutions to reconsider their entire approach toward Indigenous consultation and collaboration. While the focus here is on government-Indigenous relations, interviewees urged a similar shift in approach regarding community consultation.

Conclusion

This study reveals very significant issues concerning how Indigenous rights, knowledge, and experiences are understood, respected, and prioritized in public agri-food and land-use policy and programming. The interviews show that Indigenous peoples remain structurally excluded from decision-making, visioning, strategic and land-use planning, policy, and programming. Moreover, there is a

dearth of Indigenous representation across the agri-food public sector, especially in leadership and decision-making positions, as well as an absence of Indigenous-led and directed programming, policy design, and advising. Insights from this research should encourage structural change and meaningful dialogue, knowledge and relationship-building, and action in the agri-food sector. This work can be undertaken through collaboration and from a place and spirit of curiosity, willingness, respect, and friendship. If done with care, accountability, transparency, and purpose, it can allow us to stand with and support the well-being and self-determination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as we move forward on these lands together. 

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